

VZCZCXRO1674
RR RUEHCHI RUEHCN RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHHI #1850/01 3020820
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 290820Z OCT 07
FM AMEMBASSY HANOI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6594
INFO RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH 3865
RUEHHS/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE
RHEHNSC/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 0033

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HANOI 001850

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, DRL/IRF, AND DRL/AWH

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: USCIRF MEETINGS WITH HANOI ARCHBISHOP AND ECVN PRESIDENT

HANOI 00001850 001.2 OF 003

Summary

(SBU) On October 22, Commissioners from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) discussed the state of religious freedom and human rights in Vietnam with Hanoi Archbishop Ngo Quang Kiet and President of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN) Pastor Phung Quang Huyen. The two religious leaders said some laws are not clearly written, and local officials with a weak understanding of the laws interpret them differently. Catholic leaders do not understand the GVN's Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) rejection of two candidates for bishoprics for "family reasons." International pressure, Vietnam's continuing integration into the world community and the country's adoption of the legal framework on religion have helped improve religious conditions across Vietnam, according to the two. Kiet said Father Nguyen Van Ly was arrested for his political activities. Regarding imprisoned Protestant Lawyer Nguyen Van Dai, formerly a member of ECVN, Huyen said it is the clear position of the ECVN not to get involved in "political activities," as Dai did. Huyen said over 700 ECVN-affiliated congregation registration applications remain pending in the North, but even unregistered ECVN congregations are now permitted to operate normally in Vietnam. Government training manuals that encourage forced renunciations of faith no longer exist, said Huyen. End Summary.

Meeting with Archbishop

12. (SBU) On October 22, four commissioners of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) discussed religious freedom (RF) and human rights in Vietnam with Hanoi Archbishop Ngo Quang Kiet. The Archbishop said that the RF situation has improved over the last two years, but that further progress depends on improving GVN attitudes. He noted that the RF situation in Vietnam's major cities is better than in rural areas, citing the problems he and other Hanoi-based clergy have had in getting permission to travel to Northwest parishes to preside over religious services and check on the status of church-building activities.

13. (SBU) The Archbishop added that some local officials have a weak understanding of laws and ordinances on religion, saying that the central government does not seem to have the will to train these officials. Furthermore, laws are not clearly written, so local officials interpret them differently. The RF situation will continue to be based on how local law enforcement officers feel about religious groups if the central government, which has

demonstrated the will to extend its writ to provincial areas when it desires, does not do more to educate these officials.

¶4. (SBU) Kiet said that the GVN is always watching what the Church is doing, but does not restrict or prevent it from holding services or carrying out charitable activities. In "sensitive areas" in the Northwest, a visible police presence can be seen during Mass, he said. Moreover, some police from the Ministry of Public Security from time to time question people around the Archbishop.

¶5. (SBU) Catholic leaders and laymen do not understand the CRA's reasons for rejecting two candidates for bishoprics earlier in the year, the Archbishop said. According to the GVN, one nominee's sponsor was imprisoned in the past while the other's father had problems during the agrarian reform era decades ago. In the past, the GVN looked into everyone's background to determine if someone was politically suitable for a position, but the Archbishop said he thought this practice no longer applied. He said he did not understand why the GVN looked at the nominees' family histories -- instead of their qualifications -- as a basis for making its decision.

¶6. (SBU) The Archbishop said that international pressure had helped improve RF conditions across Vietnam. However, most GVN officials do not see the benefit of allowing more religiously-affiliated schools and charitable organizations to carry out activities in Vietnam. The GVN has recognized religious groups because it had to, not because it wanted to, he added. The Archbishop said the GVN had repeatedly denied his requests to travel to Ha Giang Province (in the Northwest) and to build churches in that province.

¶7. (SBU) Former Ambassador Marine had visited Ha Giang province and pushed local officials to allow Hanoi-based clergy to visit as well, the Archbishop continued. Church officials have now been granted permission to build a church in Ha Giang, but people there are still looking for a suitable area to build it. In northern Son La and Lai Chau Provinces, the Hanoi Qchdiocese also has not been allowed to send priests to preside over mass and oversee construction of new

HANOI 00001850 002.2 OF 003

churches. In Hoa Binh Province (which is in the Hanoi Diocese), the Archbishop has not been allowed to visit and, in fact, the local government has replaced a church with a government building.

¶8. (SBU) To Commissioner Preeta Bansal's question on whether Father Nguyen Van Ly is a political or religious prisoner, Kiet responded that "it is fair to say he was arrested for his political activities such as forming a political party." Ly is the only Catholic leader that Kiet is aware of who is in prison. On where the Archbishop draws the line on what is political, not religious, expression, the Archbishop said that "we do not do things that are against the government."

¶9. (SBU) The Archbishop added that the GVN's failure to return church property remains a problem. Years ago, the GVN seized many church properties in Hoa Binh Province, but there has been no progress in getting them back, he added. In Hanoi proper, the GVN has failed to return church properties near the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum and Saint Joseph's Catholic Church.

¶10. (SBU) For issues the GVN takes a great interest in, it will dedicate time and resources to training local officials, Kiet continued. Moreover, sometimes central GVN officials instruct local officials to make things difficult for the church. Local officials do not know the laws and sometimes central government leaders can sway local officials to not allow certain church activities. Kiet gave no specific examples to support this claim.

¶11. (SBU) The GVN has granted the Church some leeway in carrying out educational and health care activities, the Archbishop continued. The Church operates a kindergarten and schools for disadvantaged youth. The GVN never officially granted permission for the Church to carry out many of its charitable activities. This probably is because officials do not pay attention to or want to impede that work, he said.

¶12. (SBU) USCIRF met separately on October 22 with the President of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN), Pastor Phung Quang Huyen and ethnic minority Protestant leaders from the Northwest Highlands. President Huyen, along with two deputies and a handful of ethnic Hmong and Dzao pastors from Lang Son and other Northern Vietnamese provinces, described for USCIRF the ECVN's development since its founding in 1955, interrupted by the war period. The GVN, they said, has now officially recognized 14 Protestant denominations in Vietnam and registered 52 of ECVN's congregations nationwide.

¶13. (SBU) However, over 700 ECVN-affiliated congregation registration applications remained pending, Huyen continued. Huyen said that even unregistered ECVN congregations were now permitted to operate normally in Vietnam. Huyen attributed improvements in the GVN's tolerance of religious freedom to Vietnam's "reintegration into the rest of the world" with WTO and Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) status, and the adoption in recent years of its new legal framework on religion.

¶14. (SBU) President Huyen said there had been "significant improvements for ECVN" in the last couple of years, citing more permits to construct churches. However, enforcement of the new legal framework was still "hit or miss" with many of the new laws not well interpreted at the local levels and implemented slowly. Responding to a question from USCIRF about reported government training manuals for local GVN officials which encouraged forced renunciations of faith, President Huyen said they "no longer existed."

¶15. (SBU) Huyen also had not heard of any beatings of Protestant worshippers since 2006. Rather, Huyen said, the issues he faces are a lack of awareness and education among local government officials, as well as among worshippers. He also said the GVN had been alarmed at the sudden growth of Protestantism in the country. Huyen's deputies said missionary work was generally not allowed by authorities in the North, and many individuals, such as trained pastors, were limited in their ability to move from one district to another for purposes of religious instruction. President Huyen said several GVN internal security issues hindered a greater opening for Protestant congregations in the North.

¶16. (SBU) When asked by USCIRF about imprisoned Protestant lawyer Nguyen Van Dai, formerly a member of ECVN, President Huyen said it was the clear position of the ECVN not to get involved in "political activities." He said Dai was part of the pro-democracy Bloc 8406 movement and was "not a religious prisoner." USCIRF raised the issue of reports of children under age 14 being prevented by

HANOI 00001850 003.2 OF 003

authorities from attending religious services with their parents, and Protestant youth groups not being allowed to convene. President Huyen said this policy was "not clear," but he had heard about the issue, and minors should be allowed to attend religious services.

¶17. (U) This cable was cleared by Chairman Cromartie.

MICHALAK